

*Playing Our Part*  
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April 8, 2004 — Maundy Thursday

Luke 23.26-31 (NRSV)

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’; and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?”

According to Luke, before Jesus was actually nailed to the cross and crucified, the last words he spoke were proverbial: “If they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” The green wood represents the present moment, the dry wood the future. If the people of Jerusalem in that present moment were capable of such violence against a prophet of peace, what will they be capable a few decades later when the Roman army laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed it?<sup>1</sup> Histories of that time tell of atrocities as evil as any we can read about in our own time. So Jesus’ words bespoke a powerful and dismal truth: the world as they knew it was coming to an end.

Don’t we often feel the same way with the dismal news that comes at us from the moment the clock radio awakens us until we turn off the late evening newscast and head to bed? What’s with this crazy world anyway? Even the movies these days can be unsettling. Several of the top grossing films this week are about death and hell and, of course, then there is Mel Gibson’s movie. The controversy around *The Passion of the Christ* is unprecedented. Christians and Jews and others are all over the place in their opinions about this movie’s importance and value or lack thereof. Is it a good movie or a bad one? Is it helpful or harmful?

But there is nothing new here. It’s not the first time a movie about Jesus has raised peoples’ hackles. In fact, every major movie made about Christ has been controversial. I remember the controversy from a film made almost 40 years ago. “The Greatest Story Ever Told” was completed in 1965. The producers decided to use famous movie stars in some of the bit parts. John Wayne was cast as the Roman centurion at the cross. He had one line and delivered it badly. Charlton Heston who just a few years before played Ben-Hur and a few years before that Moses, was John the Baptist. And Sidney Portier played the part of Simon Cyrene who carried Jesus’ cross in tonight’s text. Considerable fuss was made back then — remember this was the mid-1960s — about a black actor in that role even though the historical Simon was in fact from Cyrene which was located in north Africa. The historical Simon was a black African. Yet, to everyone’s shame, little if any fuss was made about Max von Sydow — a Scandinavian! and by his own words, a nonbeliever — playing the part

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series 3 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991) 373.

of Jesus the Jew.<sup>2</sup> Movies about Jesus always upset somebody because if for no other reason, whether they are well made or not, they put images on the screen that challenge or conflict with the images in our heads.

So what about these images in tonight's text. Images of the black Simon being made to carry Jesus' cross. Images of the women weeping. Images of Jesus speaking words suggesting the world was coming undone? Here are a few thoughts to guide our reflections.

On your own tonight, read through the passion story in Luke's Gospel. When you do, you will notice that after Simon picks up the cross, the crowd, absent for awhile, reappears in the story. They don't seem to be shouting "crucify" any longer. In fact, this crowd may represent those common people who daily listened to Jesus in the Temple. Once more Luke finds in the women an unmatched sympathy and grief, for they alone weep over what is happening.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus says the greater cause for tears is an unbelieving Jerusalem. So terrible is its fate that the fortunate women will be those without children. When suffering comes upon a community, it's the mothers and children who always suffer the most. Jesus recites the proverb about the wood being green. As I've already mentioned, if such a tragedy as his death can occur in a time relatively non-inflammatory, imagine the holocaust when Jerusalem is a tinderbox.

Of course, Luke wrote his gospel and recalled Jesus' words after the holocaust actually happened. In the year 70, some 37 years after the crucifixion, Roman soldiers destroyed Jerusalem and burned the temple to the ground.<sup>4</sup> That was a devastating tragedy not only for Jews but for Christians as well. If at times we feel like the world is coming to an end, the early followers of Jesus were certain it was. The signs were all around them. Jerusalem and the Temple had been at the center of faith in God for nearly a thousand years. That was now destroyed. How long could the world then endure? Luke saw the crucifixion and the destruction of Jerusalem as part of the same decisive action of God, the working out of cosmic drama. The early Christians had faith that God was in control. But the world as they understood it was ending.

So those early Christians needed to know what to do. One possibility was to mourn as the women did when Jesus was crucified. But Luke wanted to hint at another course of action. He did

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<sup>2</sup> "The Greatest Story Ever Told" (1965) was directed by George Stevens and starred Max von Sydow as Jesus. Stevens took the approach of casting well-known actors in many of the roles, both major and minor. Notable were: Pat Boone as the angel at the tomb, José Ferrer as Herod Antipas, Charlton Heston as John the Baptist, Martin Landau as Caiaphas, Angela Lansbury as Claudia, David McCallum as Judas Iscariot, Roddy McDowall as Matthew, Dorothy McGuire as the Virgin Mary, Sal Mineo as Uriah, Donald Pleasence as Satan, Sidney Poitier as Simon of Cyrene, Claude Rains as King Herod, Telly Savalas as Pontius Pilate, Robert Blake as Simon the Zealot, Jamie Farr as Thaddaeus, Robert Loggia as Joseph, and in one of the most egregious examples of miscasting every, John Wayne as the centurion. Internet Movie Database, online, <http://www.imdb.com>, Internet, 8 Apr. 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 271. The prophetic background is in Zechariah 12.10 where the prophet said: "And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn."

<sup>4</sup> The most likely date for the crucifixion is April 3, 33.

that in the very first verse of our text. Listen to it again: “As they led [Jesus] away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.” You see, Luke was not just describing what happened to Jesus on the *Via Dolorosa* and how by chance or providence a man from Africa was forced to carry the cross. Luke was describing that but more importantly he was describing what happens to all disciples. We are all bit players. The cosmic drama is going on around us. There is no way to fully understand what God is doing providentially for the world. But we have our part to play. And just like Simon, we are thrust upon the scene and must do what we can.

A few lines from one of Shakespeare’s plays relate to this. I don’t know Shakespeare as well as I would like. Maybe you don’t either but you’ll recognize some of these lines. In *As You Like It* (2.7) one of the characters comments on a very sad story just told them by a visitor.

*Duke Senior:*

Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy.  
This wide and universal theater  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in.

In other words, there is a lot of misery on the “human stage.” To which his friend replies:

*Jaques:*

All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

We hear this famous speech quoted frequently. We don’t often hear the pessimistic tone on which it ends. The seven ages of human life are described each in turn and the seventh is expressed this way:

*Jaques:*

Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

However true it may be, that’s a dismal description of the end of human life.

Friends, Luke would have us see our part in differently. Our part is to take up the cross and follow Jesus. In that, Simon of Cyrene is the model for all discipleship. Remember what Jesus said? “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9.23) That’s exactly what Simon did. He took up the cross and followed behind Jesus.

You and I must do the same every day. No, the destiny of the universe does not hang upon our shoulders. Historians of human history will take little if any note of us. But that does not mean that our lives simply end “sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” It does not mean that our lives don’t count. What counts is that we daily take up the cross and follow Jesus. We may be but bit players in the cosmic drama. But in those roles, we live out the faith to which our Lord calls

us.

Take up our cross. We've heard it so many times and still wonder what it means. The usual images we conjure are martyrdom and shed blood. Pray God that, should those ever be our lot, we would have the courage to play the part well.

But we will not likely be martyred. No, for us the cross means living in the light of a different world. In the truest sense, the old world really did come to an end in the cross of Jesus Christ, just like Luke reported. But in the cosmic scheme of things, the new world is still coming to be. God is doing that and we play our part when we take up our cross and follow our Lord. May God help us so to do.